Reproductive system health for men and women

Most of us are concerned about our health and we make sure we do what we can to avoid cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and other chronic illnesses. We watch our blood pressure and cholesterol levels, eat a healthy diet and try to stay physically active. But how many of us focus on the health of our reproductive system? Reproductive health is an often overlooked aspect of well-being. Whether it's because of embarrassment, fear, or social stigma, many people (especially men), do not want to know want to know what's going on "down there." But good health involves caring for every system in our body.

Fortunately, media campaigns and increased openness are encouraging men and women of all ages to be more informed about reproductive health, know what symptoms to watch for and seek regular check-ups.

Where women are concerned

There are numerous infections and conditions that can affect a woman's reproductive health. Some of the most serious conditions are:

Cancer. There are five main gynecologic cancers: ovarian, cervical, uterine, vaginal and vulvar. One of the most common is cervical cancer, which is easily treated if detected early, usually through a PAP test. It is usually caused by the sexually transmitted organism HPV (or human papillomavirus).

Endometriosis occurs when tissues resembling the lining of the uterus are found in other places of the abdomen, causing intense pelvic pain and fertility problems.

Uterine fibroids are the most common noncancerous tumours in women of childbearing age. The cause is unknown. Symptoms include:

- Heavy or painful periods or bleeding between periods.
- Feeling "full" in the lower abdomen.
- Frequent urination.
- Pain during sex.
- Lower back pain.
- Reproductive problems.

Some women will have no symptoms which is why routine examinations are important.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is when the ovaries or adrenal glands produce more male hormones than normal. One result is that cysts (fluid-filled sacs) develop on the ovaries. Women who are obese are more likely to have PCOS. Women with PCOS are at an increased risk of developing diabetes and heart disease. Symptoms may include:

- Infrequent, irregular or absent periods.
- Difficulty getting pregnant.
- Obesity.
- Acne.
- Hair growth on face, chest or lower abdomen.
- Darkened, thickened skin, sometimes appearing similar to velvet in the armpits.

It's important to see your family physician if you are experiencing any unusual symptoms.

Where men are concerned

Maintaining good reproductive system health is of equal importance to men. Unfortunately, men are less likely to seek help or get regular check-ups, although that seems to the improving in many countries thanks to public health campaigns. Some of the more common reproductive health issues affecting men are:

Benign prostatic hypertrophy involves enlargement of the prostate gland and generally affects men over 50. In BPH, a man might experience difficulty urinating. BPH can often be relieved through medications or surgery when its symptoms become severe.

Prostate cancer is the second most common cancer in men (behind lung cancer) and approximately one in seven men will be diagnosed at some time in their lives. Fortunately, when detected early, prostate cancer survival rates are better than 98 percent. Thanks to media campaigns encouraging men to get annual check-ups and testing, deaths from the disease are decreasing in many countries. Annual screenings are vital because many men have no early symptoms. When they do, they could experience any of the following:

- Difficulty or pain urinating. These symptoms are also often associated with benign prostatic hypertrophy.
- Blood in urine or semen.
- Pain in the hips, pelvis, spine or upper legs.
- Pain or discomfort during ejaculation.

Erectile dysfunction has many causes, including side effects from certain medications, stress and anxiety. Fortunately, once the cause is found, the condition is often easily treated.

Where everybody is concerned

There is one issue that affects men and women equally and can have serious health ramifications: sexually transmitted infections. If the STI is caused by a bacteria (chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis) it can be treated with antibiotics or other medicines. However, if the STI caused by a virus (herpes, HIV), there is no cure, although antiviral medication can help control symptoms.

It’s important to note that many people have no symptoms and women may mistake common STI symptoms (abnormal discharge or painful urination) for a bladder or vaginal infection. If you are not in a long-term, committed relationship and are sexually active, be sure to get tested for STIs regularly – and practice safe sex. Condoms are the first defense against STIs.

For more information on reproductive system health issues for both men and women, talk to your family physician or contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.